

International Conference
“The Holocaust: Remembrance and Lessons”
4 - 5 July 2006, Riga, Latvia

Evening lecture at the Big Hall of Latvian University

The Holocaust in its European Context
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Allow me please, at the outset, to place the cart firmly before the horse, and set before you the justification for this paper, and in a sense, its conclusion. The Holocaust – Shoah – has to be seen in its various contexts. One context is that of Jewish history and civilisation, another is that of antisemitism, another is that of European and world history and civilisation. There are two other contexts, and they are very important: the context of World War II, and the context of genocide, and they are connected. Obviously, without the war, it is unlikely that there would have been a genocide of the Jews, and the war developments were decisive in the unfolding of the tragedy. Conversely, it is increasingly recognized today that while one has to understand the military, political, economic, and social elements as they developed during the period, the hard core, so to speak, of the World War, its centre in the sense of its overall cultural and civilisational impact, were the Nazi crimes, and first and foremost the genocide of the Jews which we call the Holocaust, or Shoah. The other context that I am discussing here is that of genocide – again, obviously, the Holocaust was a form of genocide. If so, the relationship between the Holocaust and other genocides or forms of genocide are crucial to the understanding of that particular tragedy, and of its specific and universal aspects. Thus, a triangle of contexts is discussed, with the Shoah at its centre, and World War II and genocide as the necessary backgrounds, without which an understanding of the Shoah will be difficult to achieve. Hence this paper.

We rarely ask the question – why did World War II break out; not how, but why? Usually, we deal with how it happened, what preparations were made, who did what and when. It is clear that Nazi Germany initiated the conflict, and few are naïve enough to argue that Germany attacked Poland because of Danzig, the Polish Corridor, or because of the wish to regain the territories lost through the Treaty of Versailles. Why did the German leadership want the war, against the wishes of the German population? The weight of the documentation seems to me to indicate that the drive was purely ideological. The Nazi

movement came to power committed to expansion and conquest, based on a racist ideology. It saw war as the natural state of a healthy human society. It thus rebelled against the legacy of an Enlightenment of which it itself was, if one may use that term, an illegitimate offspring. But for the ordinary German citizen, the first priority was to get out of the terrible economic conditions that prevailed in Germany. In this, the Nazis succeeded. Germany's economic recovery was the result, first of all, of the upswing from the depth of the depression, an upswing that had started before the Nazi accession to power; second, the result of massive bribes of the German masses through a rise in pensions and real wages, paid for by deficit financing. They could have raised real wages even more, but did not do so in order to pay for rearmament. Rearmament brought them to the brink of financial collapse, despite the overall improvement of the economy, and they got out of that when things became really bad, in 1937–8, by robbing Jewish property, as Goetz Aly has shown in his recent book *Hitlers Volksstaat*. Faced with great economic obstacles which were the result of the imperatives of their expansionist ideology, their way out was an increasing radicalisation, and a race forward into war and conquest. They did not occupy other countries in order to avoid an economic collapse, but they managed to continue to be afloat economically by exploiting the conquered countries as well as their allies mercilessly, and in fact paying for the war by robbing them clean of all possible assets. The first target of this policy were the Jews. However, robbing the Jews was not the reason for the Holocaust. The annihilation of the Jews, which had been an implicit, not explicit, part of the ideology from the very beginning in any case, was one of the main results, first of all of that ideology, and then the attempt to implement it. They robbed the Jews first, and then killed **them**, and not all bespectacled men and all women with red hair, because of antisemitism, which was a central element in the *Weltanschauung* that spurred the regime forward.

The other main part of Nazi ideology was expansion. Why were they committed to expansion? Did German economic and social recovery depend on conquest? Hardly. By 1936–8, the economy was on its way out of the crisis, unemployment had taken a nosedive, social stability had been partly achieved, and it was rearmament and war preparations that caused the financial crisis of 1937–8. Germany did not need a war to maintain a solid growth. It did not need to occupy Eastern Europe to get grain or raw materials, as it produced manufactured goods that could easily and profitably be exchanged for the things it needed. It certainly did not need any land. Germany today, a smaller country than in

1937, with a larger population, not only does not need to export any superfluous people, but needs constant immigration to maintain its standard of living. The hunger for land was an ideological postulate, the expansion a chimera, the war materially useless. I repeat: from a rational German perspective, a pointless war, a war produced by ideology, not by pragmatic needs.

Antisemitism was a central component of the ideology that produced that war, with its 35 million or more victims in Europe, resulting in the destruction of much of the continent. How central was it? I think that it was very central indeed. It was fed by the quasi-religious character of National Socialism, which promised redemption and a Thousand-Year Reich that would be brought about by the Divine Messiah, the Jesus-figure, who had become flesh and blood – Adolf Hitler. The struggle for everlasting happiness would be conducted against Satan and his minions, and Satan was the stereotypical Jew. This was easily understood by the German masses, as it derived from Christian antisemitism, which had never been genocidal, but which had formed the source of the Nazi variety, contrary to the statements of our Catholic friends. The way I read it, the desire to force the emigration of Jews from Germany in the thirties, to Poland in late 1939, to Madagascar in 1940, and the Soviet Arctic in early 1941, and then the genocide itself, were all part of the wish to exorcise the devil from the midst of the Chosen People, namely the Nordic peoples of the Aryan race. The methods, the timing, the stages in which these policies developed, were determined by pragmatic considerations. The aim, however, was entirely non-pragmatic, and as I said, purely ideological. Thus, the existence of ghettos, for instance in Bialystok and Lodz, was very important for the German war machine, and was supported by local Nazi officials. Contrary to all modern capitalistic logic of cost-effectiveness, the ghettos were annihilated by orders from the Berlin centre, in pursuance of ideological aims. Examples of this kind are legion.

This non-pragmatic character of the genocide of the Jews is one of the elements that differentiate it from other genocides. Other elements were the totality, that is the desire to annihilate every single Jew defined as such by the Nazis (obviously, no Satan could be left to stay around if the Nazi Chosen People project was to succeed); the universality, namely the idea, developed in stages, that Jews everywhere should be treated the same way that they were being treated in Nazi Europe; and the fact that new methods and new uses for

modern technological means to murder millions were produced within a civilised, cultured society in the centre of Europe to do so. Thus, the gassing and burning of Jews was not only pragmatically more efficient than killing them into ditches by firearms, as was done in the occupied Soviet areas, but was symbolically parallel to the exorcism practiced by the *autos da fé* in the Iberian Peninsula hundreds of years before that. In both cases, personifications of Satan were exorcised by fire. Antisemitism, and the desire to conquer and rule not only Europe, but ultimately, with allies, the whole world, were the two mutually complementary pillars of the Nazi project. Complementary, because the Nazi Good could only triumph if the Jewish Satan was defeated and annihilated. Thus, antisemitism was one of the main causes for the death of uncounted **non-Jewish** victims of World War II and the devastation of large parts of Europe.

It is clear to all, I think, that the Shoah was a genocide, and as such it not only can, but must be compared with other genocides. Only then can we say whether it was different, and to what extent. For most people, I think, uniqueness means a one-time thing. If that is what the Shoah was, then it would never happen again, to anyone; it then would become irrelevant for the present and the future, and if that is so we can safely relegate it to yearly liturgic observances, memorials, and the spouting of worn-out clichés, as our politicians are wont to do. More than that: every historical event is unique, every people and their fate are unique. If the Holocaust was unique in that sense, then it was just like any other event in human history, no different from the uniqueness of the British Empire, the Napoleonic wars, or the fate of India under the Moghuls: paradoxically, then, the Shoah would then be like any other historic occurrence, it would be flattened, bagatellised – nothing special. Uniqueness turns into its opposite, total trivialisation. No, the Shoah was not unique. It was unprecedented; a genocide like that had never happened before. But it can, and to a certain extent already has, become a precedent. It can happen again, to Jews or to others, perpetrated by anyone to anyone; not in exactly the same way, to be sure, but in parallel and approximately similar ways.

The Holocaust had, as I said, several contexts – the context of antisemitism, which was its main cause; the contexts of Jewish history, of European and world history, of racism and of genocide. In World War II, Nazi Germany wanted to destroy liberalism, democracy, pacifism, socialism, conservatism, Christianity – all those things that we inaccurately call

Western civilisation. Germany's war was to clear the way for the conquest of Europe as a whole, and then, with allies, of the whole world. A new system of values was to be imposed on humanity, a racist hierarchy, with the Nordic peoples of the Aryan race on top, and everyone else in a hierarchical order under them. No Jews, because all Jews would by then be annihilated. This racist world was a completely new utopia. Mankind has experienced uncounted attempts to substitute one religion for another, destroy one nation or empire by another, or one social class by another. In the French Revolution, the bourgeoisie displaced the aristocracy; so that the original idea of communism, before it became the ideology of the Soviet imperialist regime, namely the attempt to replace the bourgeoisie by the working class, is not really new. But Nazism was new; the establishment of a racial hierarchy was utterly novel – although we know today that races do not exist, because we all come originally from East Africa, as DNA research has shown. Nazism was therefore a truly revolutionary attempt, possibly the only really revolutionary attempt in the last two hundred years. This revolutionary attempt was directed against Western civilisation. The Jews were the symbol of that civilisation, because of the moral teachings it had produced. After all, the cultural basis for modern Western civilisation was the Bible, and for Christians it had two parts: the Old and the New Testament, and both were written largely by Jews. There was logic in the Nazi ideology: if you want to destroy the Western tradition, you start with the annihilation of one of its founders, namely the Jews.

Where, within that context, does genocide come in? We have, of course, the very problematic definition of genocide in the 1948 Convention, which was ratified by most of the governments of the world. The definition, as you all know, talks of an intent to eliminate an ethnic, national, racial, or religious group as such, in part or in whole, and lists five ways in which the perpetrators do it: killing members of the group; causing serious physical or mental harm to the group; creating conditions of life that prevent the group's existence; preventing births of members of the targeted group; and kidnapping children of the targeted group. It is unclear if all these conditions, or only one or two, have to be fulfilled for the murder to be called a genocide. It is unclear when a mass killing becomes a genocide. It is rather pointless to talk about kidnapping of children or preventing births, when all the members of the group are targeted, as was the case in the Shoah, and all the women and children are to be murdered anyway. Also, it is difficult to see shoving people into gas chambers as creating conditions of life designed to prevent the victims' existence.

And, in the Shoah, not just certain members of the group were targeted, but all of them. In the case of Rwanda, it was equally problematic. Hutu and Tutsi are not ethnic groups – they speak the same language, have the same culture, and are members of the same religious denominations. The differences were originally class differences, and they were exacerbated by European missionaries and colonialists who introduced a basically racist terminology. Strictly speaking, the description of the Rwandan tragedy as a genocide could be challenged. But of course it was a genocide, so the thing that is wrong is the definition.

There is no historical research worth talking about regarding genocides before the twentieth century, though it is perfectly clear that the treatment of American Indians, throughout the American continent, was genocidal. So was the case of the destruction of Carthage. We need sharper analytical tools than the ones provided to us by the 1948 Convention to call a genocide a genocide when we see it. The reason why the Convention is so problematic is that it was the product of horse-trading between the West and the Soviet Bloc, not the result of an academic discussion. At Soviet insistence, mass murder for political reasons, which we now call *politicide*, was excluded – obviously, because otherwise the USSR could have been accused of genocide. Religious groups were included, although there is a basic difference between them and ethnic groups. Religious allegiances, at least theoretically, though by no means always practically, are a matter of choice. European Jews and those in Moslem countries threatened with death in the pre-modern period could convert, and thereby save their lives, though not always. But if you are born a Jew, a German, a Russian, an Arab, or a Chinese, you are stuck with your ethnicity, because after you are born it is too late to choose your parents. There is no logic in including religious groups, and not political ones, in definitions of genocide, because in theory at least, you can choose your politics. Indeed, millions of good communists became good Nazis in Nazi Germany, and then many good Nazis became good communists again in postwar East Germany. Political mass murder, or *politicide*, is really a form of genocidal mass killing.

In the end, this playing around with definitions, so dear to academics, is really quite pointless, except that we are stuck with the Convention's definition, and the advantage of course is that it has become part of international law, although it has never been used for the prevention of any genocidal event since 1948. However, we should remember that our definitions are abstractions from reality, and reality is much more complicated than our

definitions can be, and rather than trying to fit reality into the abstraction, we should adapt definitions to reality. The reality is that humans are the only mammals that kill each other in large numbers, because quite obviously their psychological make-up makes that possible. The proof of this lies in all our laws that make murder illegal. If there was no inclination to murder, it would be unnecessary to have laws against it. The reason for this inclination, or basic instinct, is, some psychologists tell us, the desire to defend those closest to us, and mainly the territory necessary to maintain them, from real or imagined competition, invasion, or other danger. We are territorial predatory mammals.

If so, the question arises whether there is any way of stopping mass killings and genocides. On the face of it, the prospects are not rosy. Some years ago, the American sociologist Rudolph J. Rummel estimated the number of civilian victims of governments and political movements in the first 87 years of the twentieth century – the dates were chosen arbitrarily – at 169 millions, as compared to the 34 million soldiers who died during the same period, which includes the two world wars, or four times more civilians than soldiers. 38 million of the 169 million civilians died in genocides, as defined by the Convention, and of these close to 6 millions died in the Shoah. Rummel, who in the meantime has increased his estimates considerably, calls the murder of civilians *democide*, or the murder of people, and that includes all mass killings, including genocides according to the Convention. Experts have their problems with Rummel's figures. But whether he is ten, or twenty, or even more per cent off the mark, is not really relevant; the overall picture does not change: mass killings of civilians go on uninterrupted.

However, just as one can say that mass murder has been with us since time immemorial, and most probably before that, one can also say that the opposite, namely selfless sacrifice for others, has been with us as well. The yearning for death and the yearning for life are both, apparently, part of our basic make-up. In the real world, as well as in the imagined world of literature which reflects it, both have a parallel existence. Righteous among the nations, and that includes whole communities, even whole ethnic communities, such as the Danes, rescued Jews; righteous Turks and Kurds rescued Armenians during the Armenian genocide; righteous Hutu rescued Tutsi in Rwanda. Often, such activities involved real self-sacrifice for a total stranger. It is that other pole of our mental and instinctual being that

makes action against genocide a realistic prospect, albeit a very difficult and perhaps remote one.

There is no doubt that we live in a small world which is threatened by human self-destruction, made possible by technological advances. Such threats include not only genocides, but also power struggles of nations armed with weapons of mass destruction; ecological disasters created by human interference with nature; and epidemics against which there is no known cure. Also, and centrally important, unequal distribution of wealth creates mass suffering and social and political upheavals. Genocides, therefore, are not the only major problem we humans have created for ourselves. And, of course, one always has to remember that the human race began its meteoric rise not a few thousand years ago as the Bible says, but some half a million or a million years ago, and its presence on this planet is limited in time. Sooner or later we shall disappear, having run our course, so to speak. With us will disappear our cultures, our achievements and failures, our God or Gods, our beliefs, our hopes, and our vanities. But what we want, I think, is that that should happen later rather than sooner.

Technological advances have been registered not only in weaponry, but other fields that threaten us. In the US, social scientists have developed sociological and politological models based on a large number of variables that make it possible to make realistic risk assessments of genocidal developments. It is possible today to identify places in the world where mass murder may develop unless something is done to prevent it. This has led to the development of a model of early warning, which enables us to predict, with more than a fair measure of accuracy, that within a relatively short period of time such threats may actually turn into mass destruction of human life. It would have been quite impossible to predict the Holocaust with these means, so here again the Holocaust is a special case. But no prediction was needed in the Rwandan or Darfur cases; not only prediction, but close to actual knowledge was and is there, and it was political will, not early warning, that was and is needed to prevent genocidal developments. Today, some major governments, as well as the UN, have such predictive means at their disposal.

At the genocide prevention conference in Stockholm, on 27 January 2004, I suggested four types of what one may call genocidal events: one, genocides according to the Convention's

definition; two, politicides, that is, mass murders with political, economic, and social motivations; three, ethnic cleansing when the purpose is to eliminate an ethnic group as such; and four, global genocidal ideologies that preach murderous propaganda and practice mass murder, such as radical Islam today, and in the past National Socialism and communism. The Special Adviser for Genocide Prevention to the Secretary-General of the UN, Dr. Juan Mendez, was appointed two years ago. No world peace is in sight, but in the future maybe some very small steps towards a reduction of the dangers could be achieved. You see, I don't believe in utopias: to turn Lord Acton's famous quote around, utopias always kill, and radical utopias such as Nazism, communism, nationalism, religious extremism, and the like, kill radically. I therefore also do not believe in a good world, or in the coming of an earthly or a heavenly Messiah to deliver us from ourselves. I think and I hope that with a lot of luck and very hard work, we may possibly make the world in which we live a tiny little bit better than it now is. It is worth spending one's life to try and do that.

What are the options? We have to test options not only in learned papers, though we must have those as a necessary basis, but by confronting reality in the form of the terrible problems the world faces with genocides present and future. Today, this means that we have to discuss Darfur, which is clearly a genocide, even according to the Convention, and we have to discuss the relationship between Darfur and the genocides that preceded it, and those that will follow it, as follow it they will.

What can be done about Darfur? The UN Security Council has adopted a resolution to send troops there. But that is likely to take many months, the mandate of these troops is unclear, and member countries are reluctant to volunteer troops and money. More importantly, the UN Mission there has been made conditional on the agreement of the genocidal regime in Khartoum, an agreement which of course will not be obtained. If the mission happens nevertheless, the purpose will not be to prevent genocide in Darfur, because genocide is already happening there, but to stop it. For prevention of genocidal events such as the one in Darfur, academics are now working on what we call a tool-box, that is, a series of graded non-military measures, to be employed in situations where genocide is threatened, before it actually happens, and possible armed intervention to stop it if it does happen. But even if we have a tool-box like that, the really crucial question will be one of pressure on the political world. What do we do in order to help create the political will to stop mutual mass

killings? Somewhat to our surprise, we found out that academics actually have much more clout than they think, and the general idea is to create coalitions of pressure groups that will come with practical proposals, with media campaigns, and similar actions, and that will work through politicians and sympathetic governments. Will this succeed? I have not the slightest idea. All I know is that we must try.

What is the connection between Darfur, Rwanda, and the Holocaust, and why do we here deal with the Holocaust as the paradigmatic case, and do not take another genocidal event as the measuring rod for comparisons? It seems to be clear that commentators as well as politicians constantly compare Darfur to Rwanda; but then, they compare Rwanda to the Holocaust, as the paradigmatic genocide. It is, I think, beside the point that these comparisons are faulty. Clearly, both Rwanda and Darfur were or are caused by developments that one may call pragmatic: the desire for power and for land, contrary to the Holocaust. But they are of the same type of human actions as the Holocaust – mass murder of designated target groups, which we now call genocides or genocidal events, or genocidal mass murders. The reason, I think, for viewing the Holocaust as the standard for comparisons, whether such comparisons are valid or not, is the slow, usually quite unconscious awareness of the fact that the Holocaust was the most extreme form of that malady that racks the human race, an illness that is a danger to humanity's very existence – not the only danger, as I said, but a very serious one – and the Holocaust has therefore become the paradigm for genocidal threats generally. Today, hardly a week passes without another literary work being published, another piece of art being created, another piece of music, and of endless research in all fields of the humanities and social science, dealing with the genocide of the Jews. Because of the paradigmatic quality of the Shoah, this seems likely to continue.

Nor is this a matter dealing with the recent past only. Jews are, today, for the first time since 1945, again threatened, openly, by a radical Islamic genocidal ideology, whose murderous rantings have to be taken more seriously than the Nazi ones were, unfortunately, two and more generations ago. The direct connection between World War II, the Shoah, and present-day genocidal events and threats is more than obvious. There are repetitions here that hark back to the genocide of the Jews. The Shoah was unprecedented. But it was a

precedent, and that precedent is being followed. We should do everything we can to stop that.

The aftereffects of the Shoah and of World War II are very much with us – this is a past that is present, a past that still has a future, and there is a major issue that is beginning to be addressed, but that needs to be explored much more seriously, namely – the comparison between the two totalitarian regimes, National Socialism and Stalinist Communism. The parallels between the two are obvious: a one-party dictatorship with a half-mythical dictator at the top, the existence of a massive terror machine of a well-organised police state, an ideology that became the substitute for an exclusivist religion, and so on. The differences have not been properly explored: the Soviet Union was a centralised state with a centralised economy with an inbuilt tendency to massive corruption and economic inefficiency. Nazi Germany was a basically polycratic regime, where vassal fiefdoms competed for the attention of the all-powerful dictator, but which was built on a combination of powerful private enterprise and a clever manipulation by central fiscal authorities. Private property, especially that of big industrial, agricultural, and banking enterprises, flourished. Inefficiency was the result not of the economic structure, but of the intervention in the economy of an ideology-motivated political dictatorship. During the war, this ideology-driven political inefficiency decisively influenced military planning and execution as well. Nevertheless, both regimes could overcome these deficiencies in the short and medium term by tremendous efforts emanating from the centre. The political culture was different: Hitler was a waverer, basically a lazy individual, given to brief spurts of immense energy, who tried to avoid decision-making on economic, social, and internal political matters as much as possible, except in areas which he thought were crucial to the Nazi enterprise. He intervened on issues such as the annihilation of the Jews, military strategy, and even tactics. No minutes were taken of most of his meetings, no proper archival material was created to control the decision-making process at the centre. After 1938, there were never any meetings of the German cabinet; all the decisions were supposed to emanate from the Führer's headquarters. Stalin, on the contrary, was a workaholic. Decision-making was exercised by the Politbureau, in which Stalin was the dominant figure and the ultimate authority, but there was discussion and proposals were made, and minutes were taken. In the Soviet Union, there was no attempt to eliminate a party-controlled state authority, whereas in Nazi Germany the core elements of the Nazi party, and Hitler himself, tried to

do away with the state and make the bureaucracy totally subject to the whims of the dictator. Michael Wildt of Hamburg has analyzed this brilliantly in his book *Die Generation des Unbedingten*: a new anti-bureaucratic bureaucracy arose, especially at the centre of the terror regime, in the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA), which controlled the political police, that effectively undermined all legal authorities and tried to do away with the remnants of the national-liberal Prussian state. In this, Stalinism was much closer to Italian Fascism with its adoration of the state than it was to National Socialism, which was a truly revolutionary regime that tried to abolish the state as a repository of a legal system. Nazism did not want a legal system at all, not even a Nazi one. It wanted complete freedom of decision to the dictator, representing the party, which represented the people. This had no parallel in Stalinism.

Did Stalinism commit genocides? This depends on your definition: they certainly deported whole ethnicities, such as the Chechens, the Ingushes, the Crimean Tatars, or the Volga Germans. But the purpose was not the annihilation of these groups as such, and no large-scale killings took place; rather, these were punishments for quite real collaboration of most of these groups with the German invaders. However, if you accept my description of genocidal **events**, then yes, the Soviets engaged in huge politicidal, that is genocidal, actions, directed mainly, but not exclusively, against Russians, Ukrainians, and Jews. There can hardly be any doubt but that the number of victims of Soviet oppression far surpasses the number of dead in Nazi concentration camps, even if you include the victims of the genocide of the Jews. But there can equally be no doubt that the number of victims of World War II which was initiated, willed, and prosecuted by Nazi Germany, far surpasses the number of victims of the Gulag and the Soviet oppression. The numbers game here, as elsewhere, does not lead us anywhere.

There is, however, another major difference between the two totalitarianisms that has not been explored enough: National Socialism was a rebellion not just against the heritage of the Enlightenment, but against all the norms and traditions of what we inaccurately call Western civilisation, and the Nazi leadership was conscious of that. It was a rebellion against accepted morality, against social norms, against all forms of legal traditions, and more. It turned against democracy, liberalism, pacifism, democratic conservatism, and all forms of socialism and social democracy, as well as against organised Christianity. Its

utopia was a racist hierarchy, not any egalitarianism; it sought equality among the racially superior elite, not more than that. Soviet ideology, on the other hand, was based on the Marxist legacy, which saw the proletarian revolution as a continuation of the bourgeois one, and promised a wonderful classless utopia of ideal egalitarianism, the abolition of the class-based state, and full democracy with individual rights. If you look at the 1936 Stalin constitution, this is what it says. Soviet reality was of course the almost exact opposite of what the Stalin constitution promised. But the interesting thing is that that constitution was taught in all schools, so that generations of Soviet citizens were taught that the ideal was the opposite of what they were experiencing in daily life. These and similar contradictions, translated into economic and social reality, were, I think, what ultimately brought about the decay and dissolution of the Soviet empire. There were no such contradictions in National Socialism, and that regime, the worst that has ever disfigured humanity, had to be defeated by force of arms, from the outside. The Nazis engaged in what the 1948 Convention called genocide: against the Roma, the Poles and, primarily, totally unpragmatically, and purely ideologically, against all Jews. The Soviets did nothing of the kind.

Had the Germans not attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, after almost two years of a fairly close alliance, would there have been a permanent collusion between the two totalitarianisms? I don't think so. It was quite clear to both elites, that the alliance was temporary, and that sooner or later they would clash. When they did, the Germans almost overwhelmed the Soviet state. Most people think that the alliance forged between the West and the Soviets was an unnatural one in terms of political cultures and far-reaching aims. But in actual fact it was, in many ways, not unnatural that a regime that threatened all of the achievements of Western civilisation should be opposed by all of those who, in their different and contradictory ways, wanted to continue that civilisation, even in a very distorted form, as the Soviets did. The war was, in the end, won mainly by the Soviets. The West of course helped by supplying them with crucially important armaments, and its help shortened the war. The invasion of Western Europe contributed markedly to the final victory. But the war was won by the Red Army, which defeated the main German forces, at tremendous cost. The Soviet Union liberated the world from the threat of another long period of the darkest ages imaginable. This is the perception of recent history prevalent all over Europe, indeed the world, and it determines Western historical memory. It is true even in, say, the Ukraine, where the Germans were originally enthusiastically welcomed by most

people, though even there there was an important though unquantifiable pro-Soviet minority as early as 1941. Ukrainians in large numbers participated in the murder of the Jews, volunteered for pro-German police, collaborated with the German administration – but soon deep disenchantment took over. The Germans did not permit any kind of Ukrainian autonomy, treated Ukrainians as lesser beings, and then deported hundreds of thousands of them as forced laborers. The mood changed rapidly. Also, the fact that large numbers of Ukrainians were serving in the Red Army made their relatives under German rule tend more and more towards the Soviets. When the choice was between rule by Germans or by Ukrainian communists, the majority of Ukrainians in the end chose the Soviets. The Red Army was welcomed as liberators, except in Volhynia and parts of Eastern Galicia, where the armed anti-Soviet OUN underground maintained a foothold until about 1950. In Poland, too, while the Red Army was seen by the majority of Poles as another enemy, it was welcomed as the liberators from a German occupation which was much worse than being ruled by Polish communists. First, most Poles said, you have to get rid of the Germans, before you can deal with the communists. In Czechoslovakia, a strong native communist movement was joined by liberals and conservatives who had an attitude similar to that of most Poles. In Hungary, too, large parts of the army went over to the Soviets, because the alternative was not only German, but Hungarian Nazi rule. Clearly anti-communist leaders such as Sikorski and Mikiolajczyk in Poland, Benes and Masaryk in Czechoslovakia, Maniu and Bratianu in Romania, and so on, shared that view. The further west one went from the real Soviet Union, the greater the enthusiasm for the Soviet liberators. For the Jews, it was even simpler: German rule meant certain death; Soviet rule meant ethnic oppression, and later on antisemitism as well. But the only hope for survival was Soviet victory. All Jewish survivors owed their lives to Soviet victory. After the war, in their majority, these survivors concentrated in displaced persons camps in Central Europe, and were a major factor in the establishment of Israel. The Soviet victory made that possible. The Soviets really did liberate Europe, however problematic that liberation was. Except here, in the Baltic States, where the perception is different: here, the view is that there were three occupations, and the second Soviet one lasted for decades and was worse than the German one.

What is the background to this? Lodged between two giants increasing in power between the wars, Germany and the Soviet Union, the Baltic States had to maneuver between them.

During the twenties and in the early thirties, they tried to rely on the Western democracies, and developed parliamentary systems. But by the mid-thirties, essentially abandoned by the depression-ridden Western liberals, conservatively authoritarian regimes rose to power, under Antanas Smetona in Lithuania, Karlis Ulmanis in Latvia, and Konstantin Päts in Estonia. They were rightly fearful of communist Russia, despite traditional and radical opposition to Germans, for instance in Latvia. Right-wing extremist movements and parties sapped the strength internally. When the two dictatorships divided Eastern Europe between them in 1939, at first Latvia and Estonia, and very soon Lithuania as well, fell to the Soviets, who occupied all three states in 1940. One has to recognize that there were important local collaborators with the Soviets, and that the local communist parties were small, but quite influential, and that parts of the peasantry initially welcomed the redivision of land. Justas Paleckis in Lithuania, and Augusts Kirhensteins in Latvia were certainly not central figures in their societies, but they were not totally marginal either. In Lithuania, elements in the army tried to collaborate with the Soviets in the hope that they would be integrated into the Soviet armed forces as a separate unit. The Soviets ruled mainly from behind the scenes, through their local satraps. There was national oppression, political persecution, the introduction of Soviet-style one party rule, and in June 1941 deportations took place. When the Germans attacked, the vast majority of the Balts sided with them. But the Germans did not, as many had hoped, grant autonomy, never mind independence. There was massive collaboration in the persecution and murder of the Jews, and Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian auxiliary police units were a very important part of the German murder machine in Belarus, and even in Poland and the Ukraine. However, that did not change German colonialist policies towards the Baltic populations. Not even the recruitment of SS units in Latvia, later in the war largely by conscription, after the Jews had for all intents and purposes been already annihilated, helped. The Germans treated the Balts just as they treated the Ukrainians, except that deportations for forced labor were minimal. The plan for the future, as reflected in the Nazi Generalplan Ost, was ultimately to Germanize most Balts, and use the rest as overseers over other, less well-regarded ethnicities. Slowly, local opposition groups developed. They were neither very impressive nor efficient, and recent attempts to play them up as a major patriotic and anti-Nazi underground are not very convincing. Soviet partisans, usually led by pro-Soviet Baltic individuals, gained some support. Then the Soviets returned, complete with Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian Red Army units, that is with people many of whom, though by no

means all, were supporters of the Soviet regime. Whereas the first Soviet occupation lasted one year, and the German occupation four years, the second Soviet occupation lasted some 45 years. This discrepancy in foreign occupation may help to explain Baltic attitudes towards Nazis and Bolsheviks.

Did the Soviets commit genocide, or something approaching that, during their two occupations of the Baltic countries? Let me take the results of the admirable work of the Latvian Historical Commission, that is those parts of the work that I could read in English, as my source. There were close to two million people in Latvia, in 1939, about 75 per cent of whom were ethnic Latvians; the rest were mainly Russians, Germans, and close to 95,000, or about 5 per cent, were Jews. The Soviets repressed and persecuted some 3,000 persons during the first occupation, and deported 15,400 more, together less than 1 per cent of the population. The majority of the deportees survived. But of these 15,400, 11.7 percent were Jews, so the number of persecuted and deported Jews was more than twice their proportion of the population. The Soviets did not abolish the Latvian language, and they more often transformed than abolished local cultural institutions. But they forbade Hebrew, and in time effectively suppressed Yiddish; they dissolved all specifically Jewish institutions, though they did not formally abolish Jewish religious worship. Jewish communities were not transformed, but eradicated. During the second occupation, in the late forties, the Soviets deported 43,000 Latvian citizens. Together with the first wave in 1941, the total amounted to roughly 3.3 percent of the population. And though the Germans, with local help, had by then murdered almost all Latvian Jews, there were a few Jews even among the deportees of the second wave. One can hardly talk of an anti-Baltic genocidal wave. If there was anything approaching cultural elimination at Soviet hands, it was that of the Jews, not of the Latvians, although Latvian culture was diminished and attacked. Latvian historians have also deconstructed the myth about significant Jewish participation in Soviet governmental and police organs. The same picture emerges in the formerly Polish territories of western Belarus and the western Ukraine. There, according to Polish figures, of the roughly 800,000 deportees to Siberia in 1939–41, 30 per cent were Jews, though Jews were only 10 per cent of the population. All this amounts to oppression and persecution. In addition, in the occupied Baltic areas, because of the relatively higher economic and social standards, there was mass immigration of non-Baltics from inside the Soviet Union. The question is still open whether this was intentional or not; probably it was

a mixture of both. All this was very bad, but it was certainly not genocide. Had there been a genocide of the Baltic peoples, there could have been no independence movement that was finally victorious, between 1987 and 1991. It was then that the regime collapsed under its own weight of regressiveness, inefficiency, and political and moral corruption. Apart from the murder of several thousand wandering Roma, the only genocide that happened in the Baltic States was that of the Jews.

Two major problems emerge: one, the collaboration of the majority of Baltic peoples with the Germans, not necessarily because of any sympathy with Germany or with Nazism, but as a result of the political, ethnic, and economic situation determined by geography and history. This again resulted in the collaboration of large numbers of them, actively or by silent agreement, in the annihilation of the Jews; and two, a serious disconnect between Baltic perceptions of the past and those of the rest of Europe, and indeed the world, namely different perceptions of the historical role of the Soviet Union in the war against Nazi Germany. This is not to be taken lightly. The Baltic countries regained their independence as a result of a principled and admirable anti-Soviet opposition to national oppression. Their elites, because of what I believe is a deeply seated democratic way of thinking, are engaged in a difficult and very painful process of recognizing their responsibilities in the annihilation of the Jews from among their midst. They are, I am convinced, part of that world that opposes mass murder and genocide wherever it happens. They are important allies in the struggle for a better world, which is why they are engaged, among other things, in the great effort to advance Holocaust awareness, in order to learn from it for the future. The responsibility they have towards their past, both regarding the Shoah, and in a much wider context, is as heavy and difficult as that of all the rest of us. Good and evil are seldom painted in black and white. However, the Nazi regime, with its near-absolute evil, is an exception. The Western world, which includes the European Union, sees the World War II as a very central point of reference, and the Shoah as the pivotal event in it. As a result, it sees the Soviet Union as a crucial partner, a liberator, though an extremely problematic one, in the rescue of the world from a potential threat to its very existence at Nazi hands. A disconnect between the historical consciousness of the Baltic States and that of the rest of the Western world would be a tragedy.

The Righteous who saved lives at the risk to their own, here in Latvia and everywhere else, were not at the centre of the Shoah, but on its thin margins. But it is they who proved that we have an alternative, that we can escape from the abyss of genocidal events. Most of the rescuers cannot be painted in black or white, but in different shades of grey, like all the rest of us. Look at Kurt Gerstein, a German Protestant and opponent of Nazism, who joined the SS because he wanted to find out what the SS was doing to the Jews. He managed to get to the death camp of Belzec, and saw the mass murder going on there; on his way back to Germany, he met with a Swedish diplomat and through him he tried to warn the world. He contacted the Vatican emissary in Berlin, and the Dutch underground. He tried to warn, and failed. Was he a hero? In order to get to Belzec, he got a job in the SS to transport canisters of poison gas to Poland. So, in order to help the Jews, he brought gas to kill them. Saul Friedlander has called that the ambivalence of the Good. But there is also the ambivalence of Evil. And as I feel that a historian of the Holocaust cannot stay in the realm of the abstract, but has to tell true stories that show the day-to-day reality of the genocide, let me conclude with a story.

His name is Yossi Halpern, and he is still around, in Israel. He was 16 years old when he fled, alone, from Nazi-occupied western Poland to the Soviet-occupied east. He wanted to go to school, but the Soviets forced him to become a teacher in a small Belorussian village, to teach small kids to read and write. The peasants supported him. They got him a wooden barrack, some benches, and a blackboard. They even got him some chalk. And he asked them to provide the children with a small playground in front of the school barrack. The land belonged to the only rich peasant in the village, a man by the name of Bobko, who had two sons, the younger one called Sergei. The Bobkos did not want to give up the small piece of land, but the peasants threatened them that if they refused, they would report them to the Soviet authorities as kulaks. The land was obtained, but the Bobkos did not forget or forgive. Then the Germans came. The peasants promised Yossi they would protect him, but there was Bobko, and he would denounce the young Jewish teacher to the Germans. So Yossi left the village and managed to get false Polish identity papers; he went to Baranovich, the nearest town, and got a job with a Belorussian collaborator, as a supervisor of an agricultural estate some distance from the town. He did well, and got in touch with a group of partisans in the nearby forest, whom he supplied with medicines, salt, and sugar. He became too sure of himself, and in the end was caught by Belorussian

militias while smuggling salt. He was arrested as a Pole, and put into prison in Baranovichi, waiting for a trial. A commission composed of a German and a Belorussian was coming to check the jail, and Yossi went to the prison commander and confessed that he was a Jew and could he rescue him: if the commission made a physical examination and found that he was a Jew, he would be killed instantly. The prison head said he could not help him, because he had already reported him as a Polish prisoner and had to produce him to the commission, but he advised Yossi to turn to the Belorussian, not the German, in the hope that somehow he might be saved. Then the commission came, and Yossi opened the door to the Belorussian. When he entered, there was a table, and on the other side of it sat – who, if not Sergei Bobko. They stared at each other, and then Bobko said – get out of here, and if I ever see you again, that will be the end of you. Yossi fled from the prison as fast as he could. After the war, Bobko was hauled before a Polish court, because he had served as a deputy commander of a terrible concentration camp named Koldichevo, and had killed many Poles there. He claimed that he had saved the life of a Jew, called Yossi Halpern. The Polish authorities found Yossi, and Yossi confirmed that indeed, Bobko had saved his life. All the other Belorussians who had murdered Poles in that camp were hanged; Bobko received a life sentence, because he had saved Yossi's life. A number of years later he was released – a war criminal, with many lives on his conscience, who had saved one life, of someone he had hated.

I have told you about the ambivalence of evil, I have told you about yourselves and myself, because most of us are neither completely good nor completely bad. Most of us are somewhere in the middle. Maybe it is that that gives us some hope for the future.